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Like hairstyle, your brand should evolve with time

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Once in a while, but not often, it is time for a brand to just start over.

The most recent example of a re-brand involves [GMAC Bank](#). In May the brand became ... (anyone? anyone?) [Ally Bank](#).

Yes, the good folks from GMAC Financial Services decided to distance themselves from that whole [General Motors Corp.](#) thing, opting for a new look, a new message and, ideally, a new life.

Away went the blocky blue and orange GMAC Bank logo and in came Ally, with a swooshy, lowercase purple “a” as the new mark of the new “straightforward” bank, “built on the foundation of GMAC Financial Services.”

All of the bank’s messaging is new as well, with an emphasis on straight talk.

Think for a moment, about how much time and effort were required for this change. Every piece of marketing material, every sign, every statement, every everything had to change.

Time will tell if the re-brand will serve GMAC well and help it gain market share and earn consumer confidence. One thing I know is certain: It had to be done. With GMAC ordered by the government to raise more capital and the GM brand in the news seemingly every day in a negative light, a bank with GM in its name did not inspire confidence.

So GMAC went with the branding version of the old TV show “Extreme Makeover.” And I point all of this out to make sure you understand that change this dramatic is not necessary 99 percent of the time. Most companies never have to go through a massive re-brand.

But that doesn’t mean your brand should not evolve with the times. Like your wardrobe or your hairstyle, your brand should look like it belongs in 2009 and must evolve as your business evolves.

Brands must remain current and relevant — and in some way aware of what’s going on around them. Otherwise, you’re the guy in a Members Only jacket with a feathered do parted right down the middle.

There is another option out there, which we call a brand refresh. Let's take a look at a prominent local company that my firm has been working with for years, Blackboard Inc. Blackboard recently completed a brand refresh.

The D.C.-based company built its reputation in the e-learning world helping schools and campuses bring education online. But through organic growth and acquisition, the company's offerings evolved to support multiple elements of the education experience — from learning to academic life and campus communication. And it had grown across multiple education settings, including K-12, higher education, the professional ranks and beyond.

So the brand needed to evolve to reflect this expanded support of education while staying true to its core values.

After more than a year of planning and testing, Blackboard rolled out a refreshed identity conveyed through every brand asset. The change was reflected in its Web site, its logo, its event presence and even its tone of voice and written style.

The foundation for the refresh was the company's education story, which now is told through three key areas: Blackboard Learn, Blackboard Transact and Blackboard Connect.

Here is what Robert Morton, the company's vice president of global marketing, had to say about the exercise:

“We think there's a lot of value in the core heritage of the Blackboard brand. As we worked on telling the story, though, we decided we needed to think more broadly about how we communicate our commitment to education. Reinforcing the best of what got us here, but calling out the broader value we could bring to education for our clients and for our own people carrying out that work. ”

If you think about that for a second, it makes a lot of sense. A brand refresh is not just about staying current with the times or updating the Web site. It's also about creating a rallying point around which to re-examine the way you are doing things and how you are communicating internally and externally.

Morton says the exercise inspired him to look with fresh eyes on a lot of things, including the company's approach to communication.

“The world is already full enough of boring, overly formal business communication,” he says. “We didn't want to pile on any more.”

So as part of the refresh Morton encouraged everyone to communicate more clearly and informally and to get rid of the jargon.

Quoting the adage of Michael Eisner, former CEO of [The Walt Disney Co.](#), that a great brand is the product of a thousand small gestures, Morton notes that “stopping to think about who we were and who we served helped us see a lot of things more clearly.”

He adds: “Even the way we communicate with our clients has an important impact on building the brand every day.”

My advice for anyone thinking about a brand refresh or re-brand is to be honest about why you are doing it.

For Blackboard, a refresh made a lot of sense because the company had changed and needed a way to tell its story more clearly. For GMAC Bank, the company needed to get away from negative perceptions and start over completely.

Whether you need that “Extreme Makeover” or just a visit to the tailor, I encourage you to think about these issues and make sure your brand inspires confidence in your employees and customers.

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